

The invention in which an exclusive right is claimed is defined by the following:

1. A method for enabling a user to play an online game with a friend selected from a friends list of the user, comprising the steps of:
  - (a) enabling the user to select a friend from the friends list of the user;
  - (b) enabling the user to selectively do one of the following:
    - (i) send an invitation to the friend selected from the friends list, to join the user in playing in an online game currently loaded for play by the user, even if the friend is currently playing a different online game; and
    - (ii) join the friend in playing an online game being played by the friend, even if the friend is currently playing a different online game than the online game currently loaded for play by the user;
  - (c) if the invitation was sent and was accepted by the friend, connecting the friend who was invited, in playing the online game currently loaded for play by the user; and
  - (d) if the user chose to join the friend in playing, connecting the user to play the online game being played by the friend.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein if the user chose to join the friend in playing the online game being played by the friend, and if the online game currently loaded for play by the user is different than the online game currently being played by the friend, further comprising the step of:

- (a) causing data identifying the online game currently being played by the friend and a game session currently being played by the friend to be stored in a non-volatile storage;
- (b) prompting the user to load the online game currently being played by the friend; and
- (c) automatically comparing the online game being played by the friend as indicated by the data stored in non-volatile storage with the online game just loaded by the user, and enabling the user to join in playing the online game being played by the friend if:
  - (i) the online game just loaded by the user is the same as the online game currently being played by the friend;
  - (ii) the current online game session of the friend has an opening for the user to play; and
  - (iii) the online game session of the friend has not yet concluded.

3. The method of Claim 2, wherein the data stored in the non-volatile storage are disregarded when the online game currently being played by the friend is loaded by the user, if more than a predefined interval of time has elapsed since the data identifying the online game and the online game session being played by the friend were stored in the non-volatile storage.

4. The method of Claim 1, wherein if the friend accepts the invitation from the user to play in the online game currently loaded by the user, which is different than the online game currently being played by the friend, further comprising the steps of:

- (a) causing data identifying the online game and a game session being played by the user to be stored in a non-volatile storage;
- (b) prompting the friend to load the online game currently loaded by the user;
- (c) automatically comparing the online game currently loaded by the user, as indicated by the data stored in the non-volatile storage, with the online game just loaded by the friend; and
- (d) enabling the friend to join in playing the online game being played by the user if:
  - (i) the online game just loaded by the friend is the same as the online game currently loaded by the user;
  - (ii) the online game session of the user has an opening for the friend to play; and
  - (iii) the online game session of the user has not yet concluded.

5. The method of Claim 2, wherein the data stored in the non-volatile storage of the friend are disregarded when the online game currently loaded by the user is loaded by the friend, if more than a predefined interval of time has elapsed since the data identifying the online game currently loaded by user were stored in the non-volatile storage.

6. The method of Claim 1, wherein if the online game currently loaded by the user is the same as the online game currently being played by the friend selected from the friends list, the user and the friend are immediately connected in playing the online game if:

(a) the friend accepts the invitation from the user and there is still an opening for the friend to play in any game session of the online game that was being played when the friend was invited to play; or

(b) the user chooses to join in playing the online game currently being played by the friend and there is still an opening for the user to play in the game session that was active when the user chose to join the friend in playing the online game of the friend.

7. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of displaying the invitation from the user to the friend.

8. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling the user to host the online game and to determine parameters related to the play of the online game; and

(b) enabling the user to selectively determine, as one of the parameters, that one or more openings for other players to play the online game will be filled by friends included in the friends list of the user.

9. The method of Claim 8, further comprising the step of enabling the user to send a plurality of invitations to friends included in the friends list of the user, to play the online game currently loaded by the user.

10. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling the user to host the online game and to determine parameters related to the play of the online game; and

(b) enabling the user to only allow friends to join the online game being hosted by the user.

11. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling the user to host the online game and to determine parameters related to the play of the online game; and

(b) enabling the user to only allow invited friends to join the online game being hosted by the user.

12. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively add an online player to the friends list of the user by:

(a) sending a request to the online player to add the online player to the friends list of the user; and

(b) if the online player selectively accepts the request, automatically adding the online player to the friends list of the user, and automatically adding the user to the friends list of the online player.

13. The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of enabling the user to cancel the request for the online player to be added to the friends list of the user if the online player has not yet accepted the request.

14. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of automatically canceling the invitation sent to a friend included on the friends list of the user after a predefined period of time has elapsed without the friend accepting the invitation to play in the online game currently loaded by the user.

15. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling the friend selected from the friends list of the user, to bring along one or more other players who are playing in the online game currently being played by the friend, so that the friend and said one or more other players are joined in playing the game currently loaded by the user, dependent upon a number of open slots available to be filled in the game currently loaded by the user.

16. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling the user to set a plurality of options that control an interaction between the friend selected in the friends list and the user during play of online games.

17. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of displaying information related to online game play for each friend on the friends list.

18. A memory medium on which are stored machine readable instructions for carrying out the steps of Claim 1.

19. A system for enabling a user to play an online game with a friend selected from a friends list of the user, comprising:

(a) a gaming service that couples players in communication to play online games over a network; and

(b) a game playing device that includes:

(i) a network interface for coupling the game playing device in communication with the gaming service and with other game playing devices;

(ii) a memory for storing machine readable instructions;

(iii) a user input control;

(iv) a display interface that is adapted to couple to a display;

and

(v) a processor that is connected to the network interface, the memory, the user input control, and the display interface, said processor executing the machine instructions stored in memory to carry out a plurality of functions, including:

(1) responding to a selection of a friend from the friends list of the user;

(2) sending an invitation to the friend selected from the friends list, to join in playing in the online game currently loaded in the game playing device of the user, even if the friend is currently playing a different online game, or alternatively, causing the gaming service to join the user in playing an online game being played by the friend, even if the friend is currently playing a different online game than the online game currently loaded in the game playing device of the user;

(3) if the invitation was sent by the user and accepted by the friend, causing the online gaming service to connect the friend who was invited in playing the online game currently loaded for play by the user; and

(4) if the user chose to join the friend in playing, causing the online gaming service to connect the user in playing the online game currently being played by the friend.

20. The system of Claim 19, wherein if the user chose to join the friend in playing the online game being played by the friend, and if the online game currently loaded for play by the user is different than the online game currently being played by the friend, the machine language instructions cause the processor to:

- (a) store data identifying the online game currently being played by the friend and a game session currently being played by the friend in the memory;
- (b) prompt the user to load the online game currently being played by the friend in to the game playing device of the user; and
- (c) automatically compare the online game being played by the friend as indicated by the data stored in memory with the online game just loaded by the user, and enable the user to join in playing the online game being played by the friend if:
  - (i) the online game just loaded by the user is the same as the online game currently being played by the friend;
  - (ii) the game being played by the friend has an opening for the user to play; and
  - (iii) a game session for the game being played by the friend when the user selected an option to join the friend has not yet concluded.

21. The system of Claim 20, wherein the data stored in the memory of the game playing device of the user are disregarded when the online game currently being played by the friend is loaded in the game playing device by the user, if more than a predefined interval of time has elapsed since the data identifying the online game and the online game session being played by the friend were stored in said memory.

22. The system of Claim 19, wherein if the online game currently loaded by the user is the same as the online game currently being played by the friend selected from the friends list, the machine language instructions cause the gaming service to immediately connect the user and the friend in playing the online game, if:

(a) the friend accepts the invitation from the user and there is still an opening for the user to play in any game session of the online game that was being played when the friend was invited to play; or

(b) the user chooses to join in playing the online game currently being played by the friend and there is still an opening for the user to play in the game session that was active when the user chose to join the play of the online game.

23. The system of Claim 19, wherein the invitation received from the user is displayed to the friend.

24. The system of Claim 19, wherein the gaming service automatically cancels the invitation sent to the friend included on the friends list of the user after a predefined period of time has elapsed without the friend accepting the invitation to play in the online game currently loaded for play by the user.

25. The system of Claim 19, wherein the machine instructions further cause the processor to enable the user to set a plurality of options that control an interaction between the friend selected in the friends list and the user, during play of online games.

26. The system of Claim 19, wherein the machine instructions further cause the processor to display information related to online game play for each friend on the friends list of the user.

27. A method for enabling a player identified on a friends list of a user to be selectively coupled in playing an online game with the user, comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling the user to select a friend with whom to play the online game, from the friends list;

(b) sending an invitation to the friend that was selected to play the online game;

(c) if the friend that was selected accepts the invitation, but is currently playing a different online game:

(i) temporarily storing data identifying the online game that the friend was invited to play, while the friend loads the online game to be played;

(ii) automatically accessing the data that were temporarily stored;

(iii) automatically connecting the friend to play the online game with the user; and

(d) if the friend that was selected accepts the invitation and is currently already playing the online game, automatically coupling the friend in playing the online game with the user.

28. A method for enabling a user to join a friend in playing an online game, comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling the user to select a friend to join in playing the online game from a friends list of the user;

(b) enabling the user to select an option to join the friend in playing the online game;

(c) if the user has been using a different online game:

(i) temporarily storing data identifying the online game that the friend is playing, while the user loads the online game currently being played by the friend;

(ii) automatically accessing the data that were temporarily stored; and

(iii) automatically connecting the user to play the online game currently being played by the friend; and

(d) if the user has been using the same online game as the friend is currently playing, automatically connecting the user to play the online game currently being played by the friend.